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Advertising 2010: Release The Hounds

by Chris Copeland, 1 hour ago

One of the unique opportunities of my role is that I spend a fair amount of time reflecting on how we have gotten to where we are at this point in time -- and even more important, attempting to answer the question "What's next?"

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As I revisit this year and think ahead to 2010, I find myself fixated on the advertising catchphases of 2009. These phases give me clues on how to avoid slow, small steps in 2010, making it the year to be aggressive, take the reins and deliver on our terms as an industry -- a year to release the hounds and wage war against what went wrong in 2009. I'll start 2010 with a column looking at how we regain control; but for now, I want to delve into the abyss to make sure we don't repeat this year's shortcomings.

From the early disbelief of and dismissive attitude toward the depth of the economic situation at hand, to the drastic (and at times inexplicable) behavior to withdraw from the battlefield, 2009 was not a year to be proud of in marketing. As always, there were great ideas and campaigns put forward, but the overall tone was defined by discussions of the shape of the recovery and the immortal phrase "flat is the new up." When break-even becomes an acceptable reality, you get what you deserve.

So for me, the emotion I find to describe 2009 is disappointment. Disappointment that the advertising space wasn't better positioned to handle and address the economic situation for its clients. Disappointment that after years of press releases suggesting that agencies were digital at their core, it had to come to a recession before that really meant something. Disappointed that social networks became the channel for real-time apologies and customer service. Did we react well? In some cases, yes. But again, if reaction is what you sell, then flat is already your reality.

Being "The Search Guy," it's too easy to espouse excitement over the renewal of innovation in the space, the potential of a Bing-Yahoo merger if all the "what-ifs" get answered -- and then speculate about the true power of mobile in the real term. It's too easy because those are channel answers to our challenges. But we, as marketers, have to transcend channels and reach consumers. What I love about the search marketing space is the reality of intent. Without going back, I'm sure I've spoken about the promise and power on intention marketing in at least half the columns I've written.

When I shift my disappointed gaze away from 2009 and look forward, the emotion that fuels me is a sort of dogged determination. The great American actor Al Pacino delivered one of the best speeches in recent movie history in the Oliver Stone drama "Any Given Sunday." In the film, Pacino plays Tony D'Amato, an aging football coach who has guided his team to the deciding game of their season and yet finds the challenges from both outside and inside the team to be overwhelming. His team is being ripped apart and he's preparing to lead them into the game that will dictate their future.

In the pivotal scene where Pacino delivers the speech before his team takes the field, we find a man baring his professional and personal soul. He tells them: "You find out life's this game of inches. So is football. Because in either game -- life or football -- the margin for error is so small. I mean, one half a step too late or too early and you don't quite make it. One half second too slow, too fast, you don't quite catch it. The inches we need are everywhere around us. They're in every break of the game, every minute, every second.

"On this team we fight for that inch. On this team we tear ourselves and everyone else around us to pieces for that inch. We claw with our fingernails for that inch. Because we know when we add up all those inches, that's gonna make the difference between winning and losing!"

This is our industry crossroads. Have we become merely a business of execution talent, living on the scale of our trading capital, watching our worth devalued by procurement, and so incapable of change that we rely on third parties like Google to dictate to us through the threat to our very existence? Or is there more to it? Is the value in advertising about using all channels in harmony to enable deep and meaningful connections between brands and customers? It's always easy to say advertising isn't rocket science and minimize what we do, but that is no better than saying flat is the new up. Mediocrity breeds mediocrity.

So good-bye 2009, and hello to 2010. But know this. Know that the inches in our business are valuable, the people who deliver them are worth the investments, and the only time "flat" is desirable is when six feet under is the alternative. Welcome to a revival of passion and value, because anything less will be a disappointment we cannot survive.

This commentary is insightful. I recommend it to others. 5 people recommend this article.

One comment on "Advertising 2010: Release The Hounds"

Ruth Ann Barrett from EarthSayers.tv commented on: December 18, 2009 at 3:04 PM
Very eloquent, introspective perspective. I appreciate it in search being, another team sport, there is the saying that the winner makes the least mistakes. In the context of competition no one seems to have won in 2009, least of all our citizens.

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